

## **Catharsis** by **mholub00**

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## Catharsis

*Nancy, before and during and after.*

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Nancy Wheeler doesn't take the easy way out of life. She learned this in elementary school, confirmed this with a gun in her hand in the Byers' living room.

Jonathan doesn't come back to school right away, but Nancy does. She sits in English, physics, world history, and she wonders why his empty chair at the front of the room makes the world colder. Why is she always cold. Why does she jump every time a locker slams. Why do the hairs on the back of her neck stand up when she is alone.

She doesn't tell anyone that every time she closes her eyes she can hear it, see it, feel the emptiness and the silence and the fear.

She doesn't tell anyone that she has stopped sleeping at night.

Who would she tell anyway, when Jonathan is nowhere to be found.

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She doesn't go back to Steve because it is easy.

Nancy Wheeler, though, has her first panic attack in the Harrington's living room. It's been 33 days since the last time she was here and she thinks she's going to make it through this holiday party in one piece, until she looks out the window.

She sees the way the pool is lit in the crisp winter air and her mind jumps to the photos Jonathan took, to Barb, and Barb's gone and suddenly Nancy can't breathe. She's *there* again and the air is stale with blood and death and she's screaming Jonathan's name and hearing nothing in return; no one is coming to save her.

She's back in the Upside Down, waiting to die.

His hands on her face bring her back, because she's not *there* anymore. She's on the floor of the Harrington's guest room and there's a stain on her dress from spilling her drink and Steve's hands are

framing her face.

"Just breathe, Nance," he says, and Mike is standing behind him, eyes wide. "You're okay, Nancy. Just breathe."

She cries.

He lets her.

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Nancy Wheeler doesn't go back to Steve because it is the easy choice, easier than hunting Jonathan down and demanding his attention. His family needs him and it would be selfish of her to suggest otherwise.

She realizes, on some base level, that what she is doing to Steve is selfish too. She doesn't love him the way she once thought she did, but she loves the way that being in his arms makes her feel safe. A little bit more like her old self. A little bit more like the last few weeks never happened.

Her hands don't shake if he's holding them.

She doesn't go back to Steve because it is easy. She goes to Steve because he is there.

Because Barb is gone. Because Mike is his own kind of mess. Because practical, pragmatic Nancy Wheeler is spiraling out of control and she needs something to hold on to, and Steve is there.

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When Jonathan finally comes back to school, she is at a point where she *almost* feels normal. But then he is there, in the front row of English trying to cram the first four chapters of *Crime and Punishment* before the bell, and she sits down next to him and gives him a summary enough to pass the quiz. He smiles and she can feel her heart beat in the not-yet-healed cut across her palm.

She stares at the thin line all of class and she swears that it spells out his name.

The whispers start up again after that. Nancy Wheeler had forgotten for a moment, for the time that Jonathan was gone, that she was

Hawkins High School's resident whore now, and she takes it.

She takes the writing on the bathroom stalls and the seething glares in the locker room and when Jonathan tells her she can stop talking to him at school, if she wants, and he's serious, it makes Nancy want to cry, or scream at him, or both.

She just holds out her hand and he does the same and she knows that he hasn't forgotten that they are something to each other now. What-ifs. Maybe's. Monster hunters. Friends.

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Steve doesn't understand, not fully, and it's not his place to, but Steve is the one who starts going with her to dinners with Barb's parents every week. Steve is the one who has an arm around her shoulder when a car backfires in the school parking lot and she freezes like she can see *that thing* right in front of her. Steve is the one who holds her when she falls asleep on accident and wakes up screaming.

He sits with her in the principle's, the nurse's, the counselor's office when that happens in the middle of 3rd period.

And Steve doesn't understand why she talks to Jonathan in the hallways, why she lets them talk shit about her in the locker rooms, why she lets the people who used to be her friends slip away, but Steve does understand that she has changed.

Steve understands that something in her is broken.

Nancy Wheeler needs someone to hold her together, and Steve is there.

When he kisses her, again, finally, 42 days after, she lets him.

It doesn't fix anything.

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Barb shows up at the library.

And the diner.

And the park.

Always with that perfectly curled red hair, plaid shirt, light wash jeans. Always facing the opposite direction.

In the school cafeteria, Nancy is halfway to reaching out to grab Barb's shoulder when she starts to hear the screaming. Barb is screaming. It's coming from nowhere and everywhere all at once.

Nancy Wheeler spins in a desperate circle and her tray clatters to the floor and everyone is staring at her and she wants it to stop, it needs to stop. Not-Barb puts a hand on her shoulder and she jumps.

Steve asks if she's okay and she runs.

It takes him a while to find her, curled up in a ball behind the gym and then Steve is standing and looking at her like he doesn't know what to do anymore. Like he is out of ideas. Like he could walk away and leave her there and be at peace with the rest of his day.

She wants to melt into the back wall of the gym and disappear, like smoke, but he pulls her up and back into the world.

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It's halfway through summer break when Nancy realizes, truly and fully realizes, that she is the reason Barb is dead.

For some reason this had slipped through her fingers before, but now, in the heat of the summer and the peace of Steve's lake house and because last night she thought for just one second that she might actually feel normal again, her brain pulls itself together and reminds her that she killed her best friend.

It takes the whole day of her sitting in panicked silence before she tells Steve what she knows, and he laughs.

Steve thinks she's crazy.

Nancy Wheeler is reasonable and logical and she knows that she's not.

To blame Barb's death on Hawkins Lab or on the Demogorgon or on anyone but herself is the easy way out, and Nancy Wheeler doesn't take the easy way out. She blames only herself.

After Steve falls asleep, she wanders down to the edge of the dock and hangs her feet over the edge, just like Jonathan's photo of her friend. The last photo.

Nancy Wheeler wonders what would happen if she fell into the water and never returned.

For the first time in months, she wishes Jonathan were there.

Jonathan would understand.

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Nancy Wheeler starts building her walls back up with the weight that she takes on her shoulders.

Every dinner with Barb's parents adds a little more, builds them a little higher.

She thinks it was last fall when they started to crumble, that Jonathan and the Upside Down and the Demogorgon broke her down and now she is patching the cracks with her guilt.

She spends less time with Steve.

She spends less time with anyone.

She sits at the library and reads medical documentation on war and veterans and PTSD and if her mom or dad or Mike think something is going on, they don't say.

She starts school, her junior year of high school, without Barb for the first time.

The tremble in her hands comes back.

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She doesn't take the easy way out and it would be too easy to drown in the pain that eating her up.

Steve wants them to be normal teenagers. Steve acts like they are normal, like everything is normal and everything is fine and she wonders if he's pretending too.

Pretending that she's okay.

Pretending they're okay.

Barb's parents tell her at dinner every week that she needs to have hope.

Nancy doesn't remember what it feels like to have hope, it was taken away from her in the middle school gym by a girl with no hair. Her hope was sucked up by a monster with no eyes and all teeth and all it gave back to her was anger.

All she remembers how to feel is angry and afraid, but she pretends otherwise.

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She clings to the moments she spends with Jonathan like a life line.

Just the little things. The minutes before English every morning. The minutes before Steve meets them at her locker. The minutes before Will pounds up the basement stairs when he is on pick up duty,

Nancy Wheeler knows the easy way out is to let him go, so she starts eating lunch with him instead.

It doesn't help the whispers that still follow her in the hallway, it doesn't help the comments written about her on the bathroom stalls, but when she sits near him and talks about nothing, talks about bands, talks about books, she remembers how to breathe.

Steve calls him her 'other boyfriend' the first time they fight about it, and she wants to yell, wants to scream at Steve, but she's just so tired.

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She dreams about him.

Sometimes it's good and she can still hear the soft way her says her name, like each letter has a new meaning, when she wakes up before her alarm.

Sometimes it's bad and they're in the woods, in his living room, at the school and she watches those rows and rows and rows of teeth pull

him apart. Or she's there again, alone, calling out his name and knowing he's not there to answer.

She dreams about him and sometimes she wakes up screaming. Sometimes she wakes up in tears.

She wants him to be there. She doesn't want Steve anywhere near her. She settles for Holly, who slips into her bed when she wakes her up, who shares her teddy bear and holds her hand until she falls back to sleep.

Nancy Wheeler lays there and watches her baby sister and wonders how she can still be so innocent.

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Nancy Wheeler thought she was done with this, thought she was stronger than this, thought the pain the vibrates deep within her bones, the pain that makes her hands shake every morning, would go away.

She looks up the definition of trauma and finds only herself.

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The idea of Steve staying in Hawkins for her makes her want to throw up, and she does.

She is hungover to a new level the morning after Tina's party and she empties the contents of her stomach ten times over, thinking about Steve.

Thinking about last night. Thinking about what happens next.

It's too early for this, too early in the day, too early in her life, and she's almost relieved when he doesn't show up to drive her to school. At least she has a reason to be mad, to let the anger over take the fear for once, let it push her over the edge, but it doesn't last long.

Nancy Wheeler doesn't take the easy way out. She doesn't want Steve to be another regret, more collateral damage, more guilt for her to carry, but she can't.

She can't say it.



She doesn't even try, not really. The words die before they even begin.

She falls under the water and it's so deep and cold and quiet and alone and she wants to stay there.

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Jonathan doesn't let her.

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She leaves Hawkins in the passenger seat of Jonathan's car, windows down, and it feels like an escape.

She doesn't just tell Barb's parents that their daughter is dead. That would be the easy way, the quiet way, the no consequences for the big bad government bad guys way.

She tells the whole world that Barb is dead, and she tells the whole world just exactly who they point fingers at.

It was her fault, she knows, but the more time Jonathan tells her it's not, the more she slowly starts to believe it.

They come up with a plan and it's dangerous and risky and worth it. For Barb, worth it.

She is still a little surprised when it works.

She is still a little surprised that he is next to her.

---

Nancy Wheeler forgets what it is like to feel normal until she wakes up with Jonathan's arms wrapped around her.

This, and last night, and him kissing her and her kissing him and the taste of vodka, the softness of his hands running up her thighs, the electricity of his lips on hers, on her collarbone, and everywhere in between, and she wants the look in his eyes to be ingrained in her memory forever.

It would have been easy to retreat, to hide in the guestroom with the door shut and ignore the way her heart was pounding in her ears, in

her toes, in the scar across her palm, and she doesn't do easy and she doesn't retreat, and this is better.

Waking up wrapped in Jonathan's arms is better than anything.

She finds one of his hands, the one draped loosely over her hips, and she intertwines her fingers with his. She presses soft kisses to each of his knuckles like promises that she wants to stay here forever.

She presses a soft kiss to his lips like a promise that she is never leaving.

For the first time in months, Nancy Wheeler feels like herself.

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The world is ending and her every nerve is on red alert.

She doesn't run.

She doesn't retreat.

She stands strong instead, and she lets him fall apart on her shoulder.

Her ears are ringing with the sounds of Will screaming, the image of him writhing on the bed imprinted on the inside of her eyelids, but she watches so that Jonathan doesn't have to. She watches and holds him, holds him back, holds up the world, and when the time comes she saves it.

Nancy Wheeler is practical and pragmatic and she shoves a hot poker into Will's side and saves him, saves them, saves everyone.

---

After, she isn't sure what to do with herself.

The Byers' family is a pyramid of sweat and tears on the living room floor and she stands there, her eyes unfocused, and tries to think of something useful.

She wonders if Barb screamed when the Demogorgon took her, if she screamed like that when she was murdered.

She wonders if Will's side will scar, if the knot of burned flesh will stay as a reminder of what she did, if the sound of hot-poker-on-skin will ever stop ringing in her ears.

Nancy Wheeler isn't sure what to do with herself and she wipes her hands on her jeans but they don't stop shaking.

Her mind is racing and she doesn't see him stand up, doesn't hear him say her name, doesn't notice him until he lifts her chin. The look in his eyes says thank you a thousand times over, and she set his brother on fire so she doesn't think she really deserves it, but that's not something he needs to know. Forming words feels impossible right now anyway.

It's over now, it has to be over now, and she feels anxious and relieved and afraid. She feels everything and nothing and she doesn't know which way is up, which way is right.

Jonathan wraps his arms around her, holds her tightly, holds her like he can't possible hold her close enough, holds her like he is never letting go. She buries her face in his neck and her hands in his shirt and here, right here, is the only thing that makes sense.

Here, together, at the end of the everything, makes sense.

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Nancy Wheeler goes to school on Monday like nothing has changed.

Everything has changed.

She feels terrible and the bags under her eyes look terrible and the echoing screams in her head sound terrible and the words in red paint on her locker are terrible too.

The principle tells her it's easy to give in to peer pressure and hate and she is missing first period to sit in his office and everything has changed. He finds her a bucket and a rag and she scrubs and scrubs and scrubs and the red paint dripping on her fingers looks like blood.

She's glad Jonathan isn't at school today, and she cleans off his locker too. The guilt settles deep in her stomach, leaves her feeling empty, but as the 'k' in 'freak' disappears slowly from the metal, it almost

feels like relief.

Everything has changed and she's done pretending otherwise.

---

She gets there early every morning that week to wash off his locker and when he comes back on Friday, late, her fingers are stained slightly red.

There are stares and glares and whispers now. Again. She can feel them at her back, a new intensity of hatred in her direction, and she's sure the bruising on Steve's face isn't helping matters, but Nancy Wheeler doesn't care. She waits by Jonathan's car after school and watches him from the moment he walks out of the doors, watches him notice her, watches his face light up from a hundred feet away.

She can't stop smiling and when he is close enough, finally close enough, she lifts onto her toes and kisses him.

She kisses Jonathan Byers in the parking lot and the world doesn't end and it's perfect.

---

They skip school the day the military trucks roll in to Hawkins.

She's reading the newspaper out loud in the passenger seat before first bell, their hands locked together and his thumb running over her knuckles. Their scars matching up. The headline is extra large so no one can miss 'Secret Lab Exposed' even if they tried.

Barb's last school picture is on the front page, staring up at her, and for the first time she looks at her friend and doesn't feel like she's falling, drowning.

They both jump when someone throws a drink at his windshield, yells 'slut' in their direction, and he gets that look in his eyes that means he's about to apologize again for ruining her life.

She throws the newspaper in the back seat and stops him with a soft kiss.

The first bell rings and the parking lot is empty and when neither of

them move to get out of the car, he starts the engine. They take off in the general direction of nowhere.

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She cries at the funeral.

The casket is lowered into the ground and her hands are shaking again. Jonathan holds one. Mike holds the other.

She doesn't deserve to cry, she knows, because even if she didn't kill Barb like Jonathan keeps reminding her, she kept up the lie for months and months and months and she cries at the funeral because she can't look Barb's parents in the eye.

She tosses a handful of dirt onto her friend's figurative resting place.

She wonders if bodies decay slower or faster *there*.

She cries a little harder, into Jonathan's freshly ironed shirt that she is definitely ruining, and they stay at the gravesite until she has run out of tears.

When she finally emerges from his shoulder it's only to be smothered in a hug from Dustin, and Mike, and Lucas, and even Max, who didn't know Barb and doesn't really know her but came anyway, and Steve is standing close enough to their huddle that it means almost the same thing.

The weight on her shoulders has shaved off a few pounds and she's thinking this is what it feels like to have closure.

---

Nancy Wheeler doesn't take the easy way out.

She hates that standing in his living room could, at any given time, end with her on the floor, head between her knees and her breath coming out all raspy and ragged.

She stands there anyway.

She does her homework at his table and she watches movies with his family and on Thursday's, when Joyce works late and Jonathan isn't

home yet, she makes dinner for them like she's never belonged anywhere else.

Will sits and watches or sits and sketches and sometimes he even helps, like it's not weird that his best friend's older sister is making spaghetti in his kitchen, only a few feet from where she learned to set a bear trap and once lit their hallway on fire.

She hates that his house is full of bad memories, memories that make her throat knot up and her vision turn to spots, and that sometimes when she stands in his living room she can hear the demodogs outside, growling and howling, and she can feel the weight of the shotgun, her finger on that trigger the only thing standing between certain death and the people she loves.

She stays there anyway.

Jonathan's room doesn't have any bad memories so when she curls next to him on the bed, late at night in a too big t-shirt from some band she doesn't know, she kisses him and counts the colors in his eyes while they fall asleep.

They fill his room with good memories instead.

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She fills Hawkins with good memories too.

The corner store and the diner and the library and the theater and the school. She fills them with laughter and smiles and good conversation, lunches dates and study parties and nights out with the people she stood next to at the end of the world.

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A slow song comes on.

Jonathan trades his camera for her hand and sends Dustin off into the crowd of middle schoolers. Not a second later they hear Max and Lucas shouting at him, but Jonathan just pulls her closer and smiles. It's contagious and she smiles too and they spin in slow circles on the edge of the dance floor.

The last time she was in this gym, they dumped an entire winter's

worth of salt into a plastic pool and Nancy Wheeler learned that life wasn't fair, even to the best of people.

It doesn't bother her like it used to.

She tightens her arms around Jonathan's neck and thinks that he probably has a lot to do with that. That all the anger and fear and hopelessness that pounds through her veins disappears when he's there, when his hand is in hers, when his lips are on hers, when his eyes meet hers and he looks like he would happily spend eternity in this moment.

She lifts on her toes and presses a soft kiss to his cheek. A thank you. A promise.

They spin on the edge of the dance floor and it's been a long time since she felt this alive.

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Her dreams are still haunted.

She sits up in bed and hugs her knees to her chest, struggles to take in a deep breath but takes one. Then another. There had been no screaming and Jonathan is still asleep, cold air filling the room from her open window.

The soft snoring from her left is echoed by the soft snoring on her right and Holly wiggles a little closer to her, to the center of the bed.

She doesn't remember Holly sneaking into her room, hopes she was too tired to notice that the bed was already full.

Nancy Wheeler wipes the remains of the tears from her eyes.

His arm goes around her automatically when she re-takes her place curled against him. Holly snuggles in, blonde pigtailed tickling her nose.

She falls back asleep between her boyfriend and her baby sister and feels safe.

---

Nancy Wheeler looks up the definition of healing.

She teaches it to El on the floor of the cabin.

She tries not to think about the memories that come with the fire crackling in the corner, and she can tell Jonathan is doing the same.

She looks at El, at her brother and at Will at the table and at Jonathan last, where he's sitting behind her on the couch. She reaches up for his hand and he sets down his pencil, meets her halfway. Their scars line up.

This is what they are doing now. Healing.